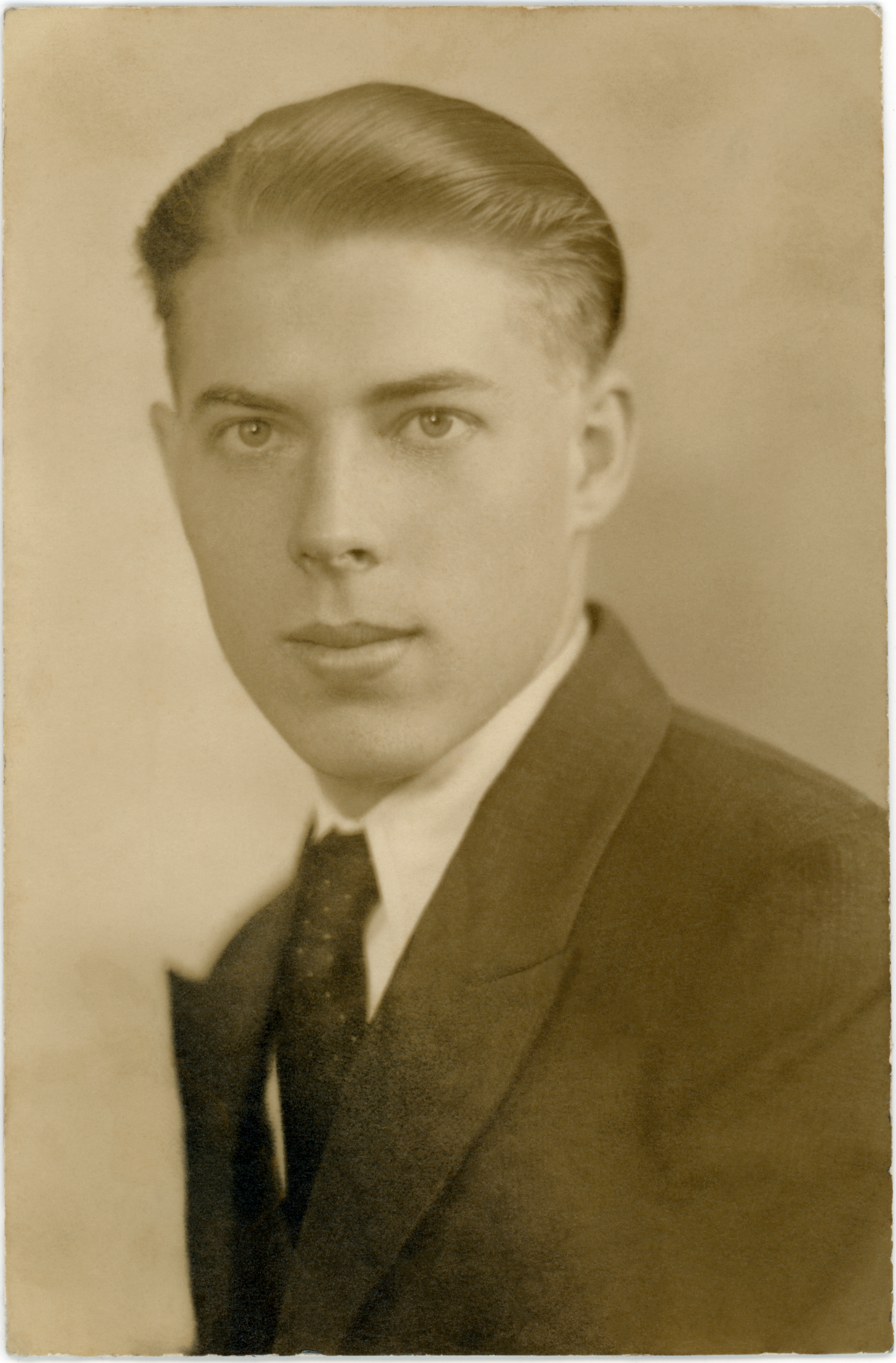

John Raphael Toner

Reflections

Jeffrey Hunt
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My grandmother, Blanche Toner Dear's younger brother, Raphael Toner—listed in the records as Robert Raphael Toner. The original print is a medium-sized portrait, just under 3" × 4½", and I'm pretty sure it came to me through my grandmother's estate—likely from her mother, Bertha Smith Toner's, things.

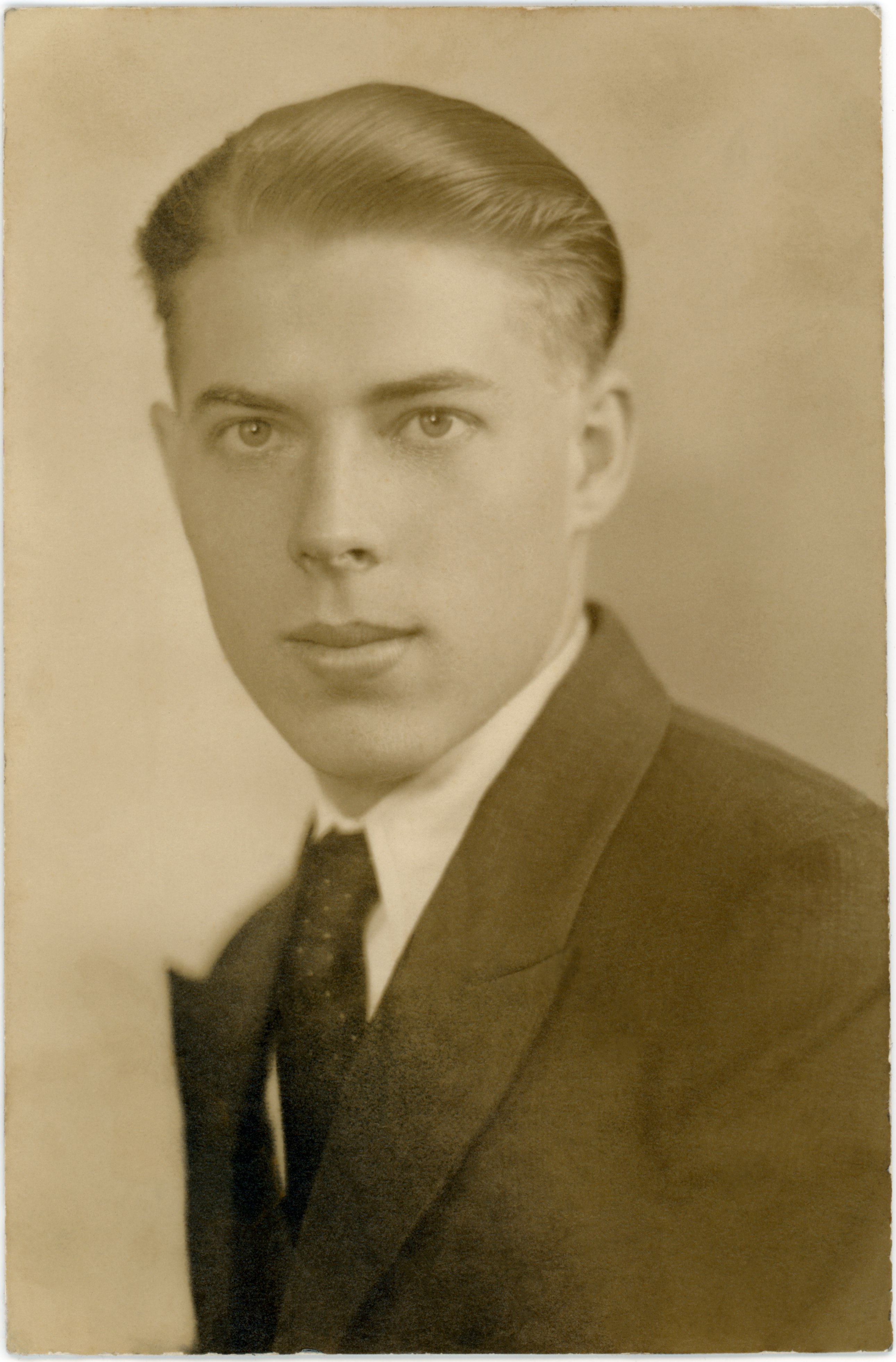
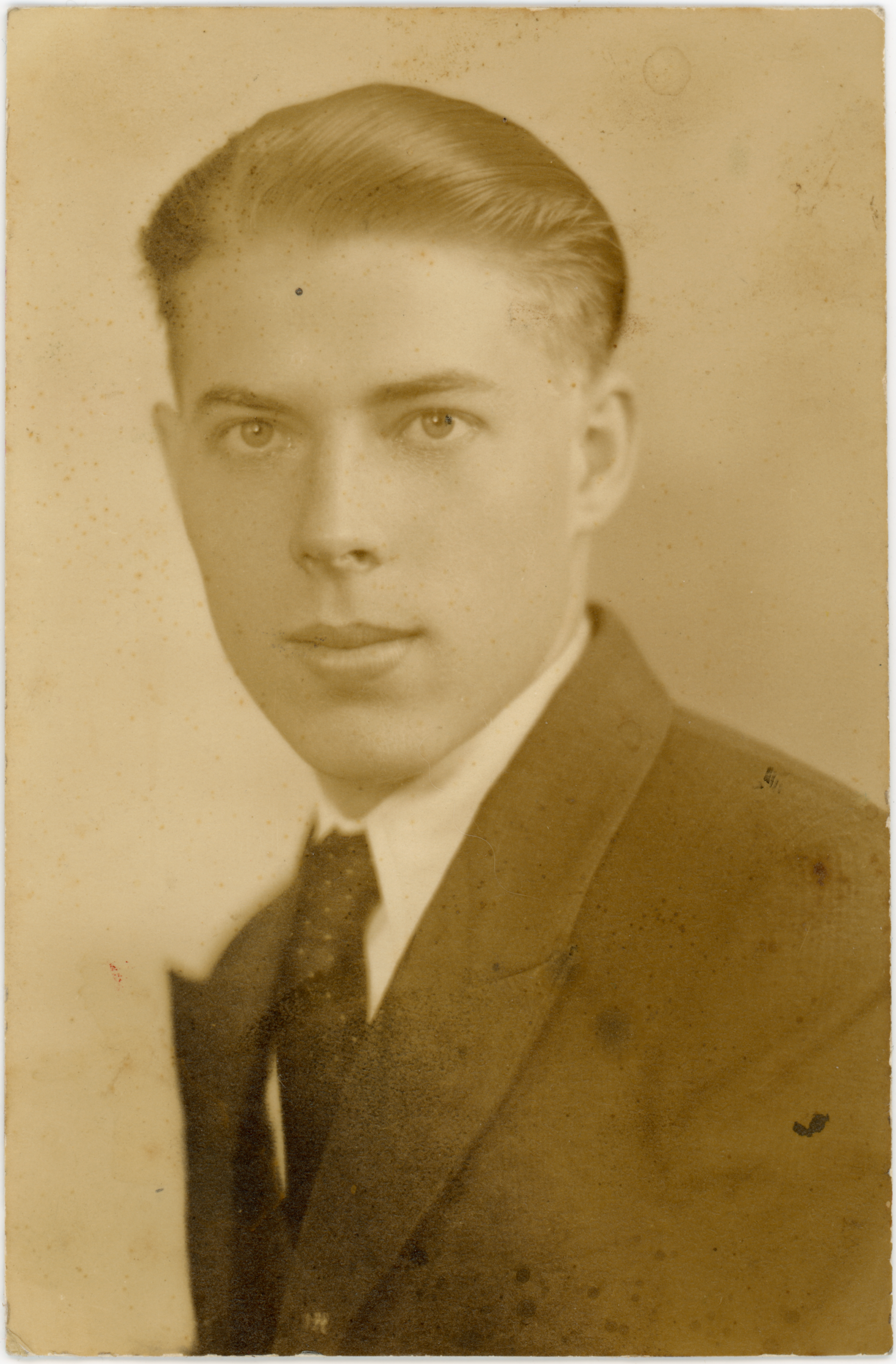
I'm not sure exactly when it was taken. It might be a high school graduation photo, or it could be from Monmouth Normal School—I'm still trying to pin that down.

Raphael was born August 25, 1915, in Yoncalla, Oregon, to James and Bertha Smith Toner. He spent most of his life in Oregon and died in Portland in 2010.

I mostly knew him through the legendary Toner family reunions—extended Labor Day picnics where the siblings and their families would gather in various Oregon locations over the years. I assume those reunions originally started in Yoncalla.

Raphael's ancestry captures a big sweep of Oregon history in one person. On his mother's side, his grandfather John Smith came west on the disastrous Lost Wagon Train of 1853 (the Elliott Cutoff). His grandmother, Esther Wells, was born in Elkton in 1852—the Wells family among the earliest settlers there outside Fort Umpqua. His father, John Toner, came from the Belfast area of Ireland, arriving through Canada around the turn of the 1900s—so yes, we're suddenly Irish—and I believe there are still Toners in Toronto. Raphael is a perfect example of what became of those early Oregon pioneer families.

Raphael—and Irene, too—had this way of making me feel completely included, like I was unquestionably part of the family. I miss him. And… like my Aunt Barbara Hopper once said when we were sorting through old family snapshots, sometimes these old photos kind of hurt to look at. Not in a bad way, I think—just that deep mix of longing, belonging, and "home," all at once.

I'm still somewhat in touch with parts of his family, and I really value that connection. I'm hoping to add more about Raphael as I keep building out these family archives.